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## THE IDEAL CHILDHOOD IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS.

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*Childhood stories of the founders of religions appear in all faiths.—  
Buddha.— Mohammed.— Confucius.— Zoroaster.— Lao-tse.— Krishna.—  
Significance of these accounts.*

THE opening chapters of the synoptic gospels, containing the narratives of the birth and early life of our Lord, form a picture of ideal childhood which has shaped the ideas of Christianity, and affected its sentiments concerning children, as well as formed a favorite subject of sacred art and literature and for devout contemplation. But Christianity is not peculiar in cherishing the recollections of the childhood of its founder. Other religions whose beginnings go back to personal founders have narratives covering the same field, with the same vivid appreciation. And the interest which in the mind of the Christian centers about the early life of Jesus prepares him to listen at least with curiosity to the stories of ideal childhood in the other religions.

These accounts it is proposed here briefly to summarize in their main outlines. The most detailed and most easily accessible material on this subject deals with the birth and childhood of Buddha, Mohammed, and Confucius, while, in respect to Zoroaster, Lao-tse, and others, the traditions are less full. There is gathered also about the Hindu deity Krishna a mass of stories of his childhood which may be briefly referred to. It will be seen by the illustrations accompanying this sketch that art has sought to reproduce these traditions. They form, also, a favorite subject for literary and poetic treatment among the peoples of these various faiths.



THE CHILD KRISHNA IN A SWING.

His two feet and left hand support the child on the flat surface of the cage which is supported by four chains fastened to an arch above. In his right hand he holds a lump of butter. A favorite mode of worship on the part of Hindu women is to give the child a swing. The art is of the rudest description, illustrating, however, the popularity of the god.

THE BUDDHA.<sup>1</sup>

When the appointed time came for the Buddha to take up his earthly life and bring salvation to mankind, it was decided that he should be born of the Queen Maya, wife of King Suddhodana. In beauty of body and soul she was surpassing. Modest and chaste, without error, holy, pure, "strong and calm of purpose as the earth, pure in mind as the water lily," she was fitted to be the mother of the Master. In a dream she was apprised of her high destination. An elephant, brilliantly white like snow and silver, appeared before her, carrying in his trunk a white lily, and, as she lay absorbed in the joy of contemplation, it seemed to enter her right side.<sup>2</sup> Wise men interpreted her dream. She was to be the mother of one whose destiny was to be the Buddha. Ten months thereafter she was walking in the Lumbini grove. As she approached the splendid Plakcha tree, it bowed itself to salute her. She grasped its branches; at that instant the lightning flashed in heaven; and the child was born from his mother's right side. Divine beings drew about the scene a sacred covering and made ready to receive and care for their newly born king.

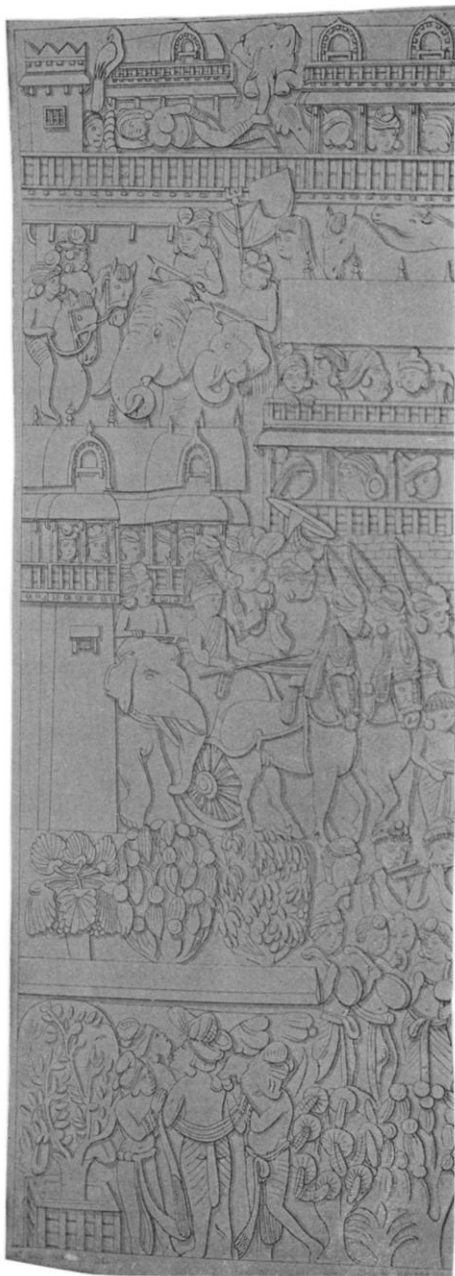
At this moment the earth shook, the heaven beamed with unusual brightness, celestial music sounded, flowers fell from the sky. As the child placed his foot upon the ground the lotus sprang up beneath it. He looked about, erect, upon all sides, with the look of a lion, with the glance of a mighty hero, conscious of no weakness. He made seven steps forward and cried out with clear voice, "Is there anyone equal to me in virtue, in contemplation, in knowledge? I am the highest, I am the best in all the world. This is my last birth. I will be the greatest of all physicians, the destroyer of sickness and of death."

<sup>1</sup> The narrative is in largest part taken from the *Lalitā Vistara*.

<sup>2</sup> The engraving on the opposite page illustrates scenes in the story of the Buddha's birth and childhood. It is taken from the sculptures of Sanchi. At the top is what might be called the Annunciation or the Conception. Maya is lying on her side, and the white elephant appears above and before her. In the center the youthful Buddha is moving in a grand procession, surrounded by a brilliant company of courtiers, through the midst of the city.

A messenger hastened to the king, his father, with the happy message; and at the same time the news arrived of the birth of the future wife of Buddha, of his beloved disciple and cousin, Ananda, and of his favorite horse, Kantanka. After five days he was named, and the occasion was one of great festivity. On the seventh day his mother died. He was brought back to the palace, and his mother's sister, Gautami, became his foster mother. A great multitude of attendants, young men and young women, were gathered about him, and his court was stately and brilliant.

Far away from the court of the king, living in solitude, was a famous monk, a sage named Asita, gifted with supernatural insight into the affairs of heaven and earth. He perceived from the unusual commotion in the universe that the Buddha had been born. Mightily stirred, he hastened to the royal city and palace, was greeted



with reverence and beheld the child with joy. He expatiated upon his beauty, and upon the wonderful marks (thirty-two in all) by which his superiority could be recognized, particularly the sun wheel impressed upon the soles of his feet. He would be either the world's mightiest king, or the Buddha, saviour of the world. But, while taking the child in his arms, to the surprise of everyone, he suddenly burst into tears. Moved at this untimely grief, the father sought to know whether it betokened disaster to the child. "Far from it," said the sage. "Not on his account do I weep; rather do I grieve for myself, that so old am I that I shall not behold the day when he will announce his law for the salvation of the world. He will be the Buddha." Then Asita, laden with the gifts, signs of the royal gratitude, retired to his solitude.

The young prince was brought into the temple of the gods, but as he stepped upon the threshold, the images of the gods fell from their places at his feet. Loud cries of joy, celestial music, flowers, and shakings of solid earth accompanied his entrance into the temple, and all the universe of gods rejoiced. Ornamental clothing, of splendid and gorgeous character, uniforms, decorations in which he might take delight were then prepared for him, but hardly had they been put upon him when their splendor disappeared, and it was made known to the king and court that all this glitter and glory was nothing in comparison with the brilliance and majesty of the Buddha himself.

He was brought once to the school in splendid procession, surrounded by thousands of boys, and with all the paraphernalia of royalty. The schoolmaster sank to the ground before him, and the prince inquired of the schoolmaster, naming four and sixty languages, which of these he desired him to learn. Amazed by this knowledge the teacher declared that so wonderful a scholar, whose like the world had not known, had never before appeared in his school. As the children of the school then pronounced the alphabet, the young prince at each letter uttered a sentence which revealed a doctrine of salvation. For therefore had he come into the school.

Once, when the spring had come, when the flowers were

blooming and the birds singing, the prince went out into the field at the time of the plowing festival. Tired of sport, he separated himself from the throng and lay down under the shade of a tree, where he sank into deep meditation. Five sages passed that way, whose course from north to south had been thus far, owing to their supernatural knowledge, unhindered by any natural obstacle, when on a sudden they found themselves restrained. They must first pay their homage to the young prince, and then pass on their way. But the absence of the young prince was remarked. His father became anxious. They began to search for him and found him under the tree where he had retired. The sun was declining and the shadows were growing longer, yet to the astonishment of everyone, the shadow of the tree under which he lay remained as in the middle of the day, protecting him from the sun. The miracle was beheld by the court, as he sat there beneath the shade, his head begirt with a circle of light as with a thousand suns. As the father bowed in reverence to the earth before his son, he awoke, and with loving words returned to his home.

Such was the childhood of the young prince, growing up in the midst of the luxuries and temptations of a court, pure, majestic, gracious, destined before long to turn his back upon it all and go forth, a homeless pilgrim, to seek and find salvation for himself and the world.

#### MOHAMMED.<sup>1</sup>

Mohammed, founder of Islam, was descended from the princely family of the chiefs of Mekka. His father was a youngest son, his mother Amina of the same kin. The father died in the first year of the marriage, before the birth of the child. Mohammed was born A. D. 570-571. About his birth marvelous stories have gathered. Heavenly visions were granted to the mother. Heavenly nourishment and encouragement were given to her. The child had hardly been born when in a clear voice he recited the creed. The "seal of prophecy" was written on his

<sup>1</sup> MUIR's collection of tales from the Arab historians in his *Life of Mahomet*, Vol. I., is drawn upon.

back in letters of light. He seized at once a handful of earth and raised his head to heaven. Three persons brilliant as the sun appeared, one holding a silver goblet, one an emerald tray, one a silken towel; they washed him seven times, blessed and saluted him as the prince of mankind. Word was at once carried to the head of the family, who was sitting in the sacred enclosure of the Kaaba among his sons and the principal men of his tribe. With rejoicing he went to Amina, who told him all that had taken place. He took the young child in his arms and went to the Kaaba, and as he stood beside the holy house he gave thanks to God.

According to custom, the child was handed over to a Bedouin nurse, Thueiba, and later to another, Halima, who took him into the desert for two years. Though the fatherless condition of the child made him a less profitable and less desirable charge, yet his presence brought prosperity to the nurse and all the family. Her camel yielded abundance of milk. Her white donkey in its journey to Mekka could hardly move along the road for weakness, but on the way home with the child it outstripped all the others. It was a year of famine, yet the Lord so blessed Halima for the little Mohammed's sake that her cattle always returned fat and with plenty of milk.

After two years the child was returned weaned to its mother, but so pleased was she with his appearance that she sent him back for two years more, at which time a strange event occurred to him. At four years of age he was one morning playing with his (foster) brother and sister among the cattle close by the encampment, when there came two angels, who cut open his body and drew forth from thence the black drop and cast it from them, and washed him inside with snow from a golden platter. Then they weighed him against a thousand of his people, and he outweighed them all. And one of them said to the other, "Let him go, for verily if thou were to weigh him against the whole of his people, he would outweigh them all."

His brother, seeing this, ran screaming to his mother, who with her husband hastened to the spot, and found the lad pale and affrighted. The nurse hastened to return him to his mother and



to confess what had occurred, declaring that he had the epilepsy. "Didst thou fear," said Amina, "didst thou fear that a devil had possessed him?" She avowed that such could never be the case with a child whose birth had been preceded and followed by so many prodigies. The story finds its counterpart in an allusion in Sura 94 of the Quran, "Have we not opened thy breast?" It was the cleansing of the boy's heart from sin. The nurse brought him back again to the desert, keeping him with her a year longer.

But other marvelous things occurred, such as, for example, the presence of a cloud attending the child, sheltering him from the sun, moving as he moved, and stopping when he stopped. So she proceeded to return him again to his mother. As she reached the outskirts of Mekka the little child strayed away, and she could not find him. Search was made, and he was discovered and restored to his home.

At the close of his sixth year his mother visited Medina, making a pilgrimage to the house where her husband had died and was buried. The sojourn lasted hardly more than a month, and on the return, about halfway between the two cities, the mother fell sick and died, and was buried there. The orphan was carried upon the camels to Mekka by his nurse, who continued to be his constant attendant.

Muir has suggested that the early loss of his mother no doubt imparted to him something of that pensive and meditative character by which he was afterward distinguished. The Quran recounts among the mercies of the Almighty: "Did he not find thee an orphan, and furnish thee with a refuge?" The prophet is said in later years to have visited his mother's tomb and lamented, saying, "I called my mother to remembrance and the tender memory of her overcame me and I wept." And he was never seen to weep more bitterly than he did then.

The child now came under the care of his grandfather, who was a man of eighty years, and who treated him with great affection. He, too, died after two years, and the child followed the bier to the cemetery weeping. Mohammed was then con-

signed to the care of his uncle, Abu Talib. It is a striking testimony to the attractiveness of the boy's character that, upon all those who came into intimate relations with him, he impressed himself as of a lovable nature, and all of them treated him with peculiar gentleness and fondness. Abu Talib made him sleep by his bed, eat by his side, and go with him whenever he walked abroad. On the other hand, it is said that Mohammed contributed his share of blessing to the humble household. The family always rose from their frugal meal hungry and unsatisfied if he were not present, but when he dined with them they were not only satisfied, but had food to spare. The other children used to run about with foul eyes and disheveled hair, whereas his little head was always sleek and his eyes clean.

At twelve years of age he was taken by his uncle on a mercantile journey to Syria, which lasted for several months. The district through which they passed was of great impressiveness of natural scenery and historical associations. It brought the boy into contact with Christian civilization and religion, and had without doubt much influence upon his future life. It was upon this journey that other marvels are related about him. His caravan halted close to a monastery occupied by a monk called Bahira. The monk perceived by a cloud which hovered over the company, by the boughs bending to shelter him, and by other marvelous tokens that the party contained the prophet expected shortly to arise. He therefore invited them to an entertainment, but when they assembled he perceived that the object of his search was not among them. Upon his inquiring where the wanting guest was, they sent for the boy, who on account of his youth had been left to watch the encampment. Bahira questioned him, examined his body to discover the seal of prophecy, and found it plainly impressed upon his back. He then referred to his sacred books, found all the marks to correspond, and declared the boy to be the expected apostle. On his return, the boy settled down into a quiet, uneventful life until he came to man's estate.

CONFUCIUS.<sup>1</sup>

Confucius, the sage of China, was born in the year 551 B. C. He was the son of his father's old age, and as the only son, upon whom the hopes of the worship of the ancestors rested, his advent was the source of intense rejoicing. His family, the family of Kung, was regarded as one of the most illustrious in the empire. An uninterrupted descent of nearly eighteen centuries from the time of the great emperor Shun has been traced. It is said that a member of the line was in the year 1765 B. C. placed upon the imperial throne of China, and became the founder of the dynasty of Shang, and only after 600 years was the dynasty replaced by another. The character of his mother is revealed in the story of her marriage. Shuh-leang Heih, a distinguished soldier and prefect of the empire, had reached beyond middle age when he was left a widower with nine children, all girls. Desiring a son, he determined to marry again, and addressed himself to the head of the noble house of Yen, who had three marriageable daughters. While the position of the suitor made the match desirable, his age was a decided objection, and the father determined to leave to the choice of his daughters the acceptance of the offer. The two elder sisters were silent, but the younger said immediately, "It is for you to determine," and declared that she was ready to become, should he wish it, the old man's bride. Soon after the marriage she made a pilgrimage to the sacred mountain in order that she might crave a blessing upon the union, and as she ascended the hill the leaves of the trees erected themselves, and on her return bent downward. The birth of the son was preceded by miracles and wonders. Shortly before it occurred, his mother was startled by the apparition of a strange monster bearing a gem in his mouth, upon which was engraved a prediction of the future greatness of the son she was about to bear. At the moment of his birth celestial strains were heard and fragrant odors were diffused. Two dragons were seen in the air, and

<sup>1</sup> The authorities are LEGGE, *Life and Teachings of Confucius*; ALEXANDER, *Confucius the Great Teacher*.

some of the glorified spirits of antiquity resumed their mortal form and appeared to do homage to the new-born babe. Upon



ALTAR PIECE IN A CHINESE TEMPLE.

(Said to have been employed by some of the Roman Catholic missionaries to illustrate the doctrine of the Blessed Virgin.)

the body of the child appeared marks by which the diviners of the time prophesied his high destiny.

In his third year the father died, and the care of the boy was left to his mother, who, as has been observed, exhibited a strong and beautiful character. Anecdotes which have been told of his childhood disclose as the chief element of his character a gravity and religiousness which revealed themselves throughout his whole life. His chief delight seems to have been to carry through, in company with his playmates, the various ceremonial and ritualistic observances which enter into the inmost life of China. He seems to have been a brilliant student, under tutors whose names have been preserved, and to have revealed not merely high scholarship but also simplicity and sweetness of character, which made him dear to all his companions. At fourteen it is said he had exhausted all the subjects his master professed to teach, and yet he was not willing to rest, for he himself declared, "At the age of fifteen the acquisition of knowledge was the one object which engrossed all my thoughts." Yet his youth was not thus passed solely in the enjoyment of extended study. His mother had been left poor. His youth was spent in poverty, and it is said that there were times when he was compelled to resort to hunting and fishing in order that he might support her and earn his livelihood. For this reason, coupled perhaps with the fact that advancement in Chinese public life is open primarily to its educated young men, at the age of seventeen Confucius entered into the service of the state, henceforth to be a public character.

#### ZOROASTER.<sup>1</sup>

The coming into the world of the prophet of ancient Persia was of divine purpose and his early life was the scene of God's providence and grace. The world was given over to magic and sorcery, detestable doctrines and practices of every abominable sort, under the control of evil powers. The child as yet unborn became the object of their attack. The mother dreamed that he was torn from her body by wild beasts but was rescued and restored by a youth descended from heaven clad in shining raiment, bearing a gleaming branch and the book from the just

<sup>1</sup> Most of this material is found in the *Dabistan*.

God, who said: "This honored child shall be the prophet of the righteous God."

On the day he was born his brain pulsated so vigorously as to repel the hand laid upon it—an omen of his future wisdom. At the moment of his birth the infant is said to have laughed aloud. Of both circumstances traditions in writers far separated in space and time have been preserved. One pious narrator moralizes over the meaning of this strange laughter. Other infants come into the sad and weary world with crying and wailing; how striking that this child, God's faithful servant, came into it with a laugh!

Not that his life was to be joyful! From the first the enemy was let loose upon him. The king of his country, a worshiper of Ahriman and a practicer of magic, sought to destroy him. But as he drew his sword to slay the babe, his hand was withered. Magi seized the child and threw him on a vast burning pyre, but he slept peacefully through the fire and came forth unharmed. He was thrown under the feet of herds of cattle and wild horses, but in vain. He was cast into a den of ravening wolves whose cubs had first been slaughtered. But the wolves protected him and sheep came among them unharmed to suckle the child.

A Baalam-oracle was forced out of the mouths of his foes when a great magician declared, "He will conduct the creatures of God in the true way, promulgate the living word, destroy the demon and enchanters, and convert the king."

When Zoroaster had reached his seventh year they made fresh assaults upon him, attempting to frighten him by their enchantments. But though all fled, he remained calm and fearless. When once he fell sick, they brought him a poisoned cup, but to his clear eye the poison separated itself from the other ingredients of the draught and he refused to drink. His father seems once to have lost heart and assembled a council of magi at his house, but the youthful sage rebuked him and discomfited the council of wise enchanters, who fell sick and died.

At the age of fifteen he left his home and retired from the world, despising the pleasures of sense, living a life of renun-

ciation apart from men, until in his thirtieth year he came forth as the prophet of the true God.

LAO-TSE.<sup>1</sup>

Few recollections of the childhood of this mystic sage of China have been preserved. His mother is said to have conceived him while gazing upon a falling star, and for eighty-one (seventy-two?) years he remained in the womb. At length he was born with the appearance of an old man with white hair. Hence he was called Lao-tse, *i. e.*, "Old Boy." From the first he knew and spoke. Lifting himself up and pointing with his hand to heaven and earth he cried, "In heaven above and on earth beneath *Tao*, *i. e.*, 'the way,' alone is worthy of honor." He appeared more than half a century before Confucius.



THE BUDDHA CHILD.<sup>2</sup>

KRISHNA.<sup>3</sup>

In those days India was afflicted by the tyrannical rule of the Raja Kansa, in whom the Asura had revived. The world groaned under his yoke and that of his fellows and the cry of the earth went up unto the gods. They in their turn appealed to Vishnu, "who is the spirit of all, and of whom the universe consists," "who constantly, for the sake of earth, descends in a very small portion of his essence, to establish righteousness below." Vishnu plucked out two of his hairs, one white, one black, and declared, "These two hairs of mine, descending to the earth, shall remove her burden."

<sup>1</sup> See DOUGLAS, *Confucianism and Taoism*; LEGGE, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol XXXIX.

<sup>2</sup> The child stands with one hand pointing to heaven, the other to earth, in token of universal empire.

<sup>3</sup> The *Bhagavata Purana* is the chief source of the Krishna stories.

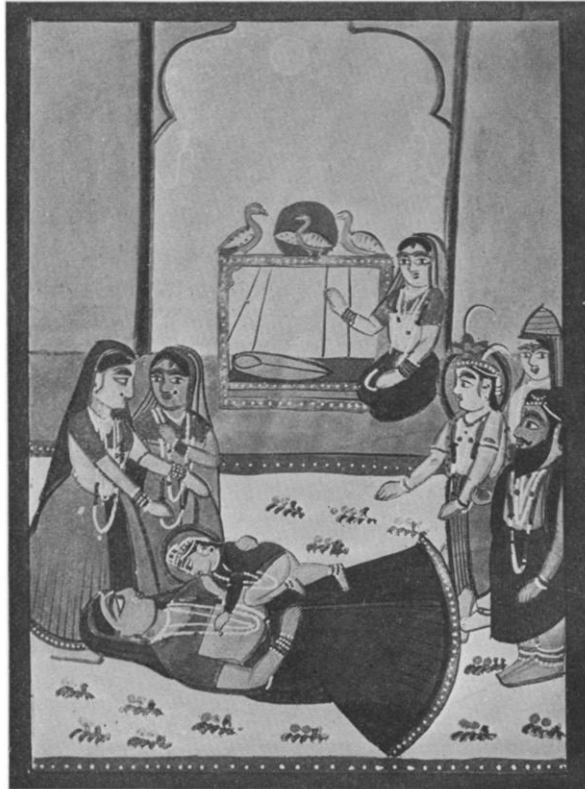
At that time the marriage of Devaki, the niece of Raja Kansa, with Vasudeva had been celebrated. In connection with it a direful prophecy had come to Kansa that the son of Devaki would be his destroyer. He spared the life of Devaki only on condition that each of her children should immediately after birth be handed over to him to be put to death. Six of these sons had thus perished. But now the white hair and the black from Vishnu descended to earth and lodged, the one, the white, in the body of Rohini, and the other, the black, in the body of Devaki, and in her was conceived the son of the black hair, Krishna. When Kansa learned that another son was to be born he bound husband and wife in fetters, fastened the doors of their house with bars, and ordered his warriors to keep guard about the dwelling.

The night came and the child was born. All the marks of Vishnu were seen upon him. Immediately the fetters fell from the arms of Vasudeva and Devaki, the doors flew open and the guards were fallen into a deep sleep. So Vasudeva escaped to the river Jumna with the babe. When he essayed to cross, the waters rose to his nostrils and he was afraid; but Krishna stretched forth his foot and the waters became shallow. When the rain began to fall, the serpent king raised his hoods to cover the child. Thus Krishna was brought to the hut of Nanda, the cowherd, by whom he was brought up.

As Vasudeva reëntered the house the doors became locked, the fetters were restored, and the guards awoke. Then Kansa found that the child had disappeared and was filled with rage and ordered that all young children throughout that region should be sought out and that all male children of vigor should be put to death. Only by paying heavy tribute and fleeing to a distant place did the cowherds on the other side of Jumna escape. Even then Kansa was not appeased, but sent evil demons disguised in various forms to destroy Krishna. Putana, disguised as a beautiful woman, sought to suckle him to death, but he sucked her life away. As he slept beneath a cart, a demon tried to drive over him, but he kicked against it and broke it into pieces. Another in the form of a whirlwind flew off with him,



but the child brought him to the ground and dashed him against a stone. The great serpent, Kaliya, attacked him, but was beaten.



BIRTH OF KRISHNA.

(From a cheap colored print illustrating the art of the common people. At the rear of the picture may be a rude representation of the swing.)

The childhood of Krishna was characterized by mischievous episodes which reveal an entirely new side of ideal childhood as conceived in India. One or two narratives are sufficient to illustrate the whole period. One day Yasoda was angry with Krishna because he would eat dirt, and she took a stick to beat him; but when she came to him he opened his mouth and she looked in and saw the three worlds, and she marveled greatly.

Early one morning they arose to churn. The noise awakened Krishna and he cried for food, but in vain. Then he was angry and took the staff out of his mother's churn and began to kick and cry. His mother comforted him and gave him food, then set him down and went away. Whereupon Krishna broke the vessels of curds and buttermilk and began to eat the butter and give it to the other boys. His mother returned and was angry. In punishment she tied the child to the churn, but he ran away with it until it was caught between two trees. He tore down the trees, and when the people came up to see what he had done they found him between the trees laughing and sitting upon the churn.

So the child lived a wild life, "growing up," as the old story says, "as a high-souled boy in the tribe of cowherds." The story of the period "is related with minute details, and it is upon this portion of his life that the popular mind delights to dwell. The mischievous pranks of the child, the follies of the boy, and the amours of the youth are the subjects of boundless wonder and delight."<sup>1</sup>

It is not necessary to remark that much in these narratives is purely legendary, the offspring of pious imagination, creating, where authentic tradition fails, the material which glorifies the sacred childhood of the founder of the faith. Nor need attention be called to the possibility which in some cases reaches certainty that elements in these stories have been borrowed from the narratives of our Lord's birth and childhood. Especially in the case of the Krishna stories, so careful an investigator as Hopkins regards much as beyond doubt borrowed from Christian sources. For the purpose of this article, however, these considerations are of little moment. Whether mythical, invented, or borrowed, they have entered into the life of peoples, and make up the ideal of childhood which to them is the highest and the holiest; as such, they cannot but be regarded as deserving of attention by those who are interested in the culture of men everywhere, and especially in their thoughts about the child, and their ideals of his perfectness.

<sup>1</sup> DOWSON, *Dictionary*, etc., s. v. "Krishna."